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ABSTRACT

The success of critical thinking courses poses a significant threat to the conception and status of the humanities. In an effort to remediate deficiencies in the writing and reading skills of students attempting to undertake college-level work, courses have been developed which aim to improve the cognitive skills needed for effective communication, understanding, and persuasion. In addition, philosophers have successfully introduced courses on critical thinking or informal logic into the curriculum, and have had them classified as philosophy courses applying to liberal arts degree requirements. While these courses are valuable additions to the curriculum, are perhaps the most appropriate way to involve students with the philosophic tradition, and are appropriately taught by philosophers within the philosophy department, they may not accomplish what philosophy and humanities requirements are meant to accomplish. In reviewing textbooks and course syllabi in the area of critical thinking, one is struck by the almost total absence of any reference to the classical tradition in philosophy. These courses, which are the only exposure to philosophy that most community college students will have, reduce the discipline to a set of intellectual skills--a methodology--and should not be used as a substitute for an introduction to philosophy course. While the critical thinking courses are responsive to the economic aspects of enrollment patterns and the immediate needs of students, they pay too little attention to past philosophic and cultural heritage and the long-term needs of both students and their civilization. If philosophers are to teach courses in critical thinking and applied ethics as a service to students with skill deficiencies, these courses should not be part of the liberal arts core or general education program, but rather of the technical or career portion of the curricular requirements. (LAL)

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CRITICAL THINKING:

A CAUTION CONCERNING NEW APPROACHES

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National Conference of the
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Panel On Critical Thinking

Critical Thinking: A Caution Concerning New Approaches

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The purported concern for this panel is critical thinking. I have taken as the focus for my contribution to this effort a discussion of the relation of such courses to the humanities in general and to philosophy in particular. I have a concern that is not, as yet, shared by many that the very success such courses and programs are having poses a significant threat to the status of the humanities and to philosophy. Principally to remediate deficiencies in the writing and reading skills of students attempting to do college-level work, courses have been developed which aim to improve the underlying and inextricably related cognitive skills needed for effective communication; understanding and persuasion. In place of a separate course in critical thinking, informal logic, practical reasoning or some other such titled offering there is often an attempt to include critical thinking instruction within the basic courses offered in the various disciplines, particularly in the liberal arts. Occasionally these two approaches are attempted simultaneously. While my remarks shall initially deal with courses which stand alone I shall also indicate how programs which integrate critical thinking instruction throughout the curricula also pose a threat to the conception of the humanities and to their status

in higher education.

What has led me to raise this concern is a condition that has arisen within the last few years at many two-year colleges and universities across the United States in which philosophers have been successful in introducing courses on critical thinking or informal logic into the curriculum and having them considered as philosophy courses and then,in many instances, have had the credits taken in such courses applied toward the satisfaction of degree requirements in the liberal arts, the humanities, and (in the situation that concerns me most) in philosophy. At many two-year colleges and to a lesser extent at some four-year colleges it is possible to take a course in critical thinking or practical reasoning or informal logic and not only to have it count as a philosophy course but to have it satisfy,in total, the philosophy requirement, if any , or ,in part, the humanities requirements. The question which I put before my colleagues is just what is the content of such courses to be if they are to perform the function within the curriculum that requirements in philosophy were meant to serve? What justifies having a course in critical thinking being considered as an introduction to philosophy would be considered? Should a course which deals primarily with form, with processes, with thinking skills, be considered as capable of accomplishing what the standard introduction to philosophy courses would do for the students who successfully completed them? Can courses which concentrate on form be equated with courses which were heavy with substance?

In order to look at the problem in more concrete terms the

question is recast as follows: how can a student who has taken a course on critical thinking and not read or heard a single word of or about any of the great philosophers such as Plato , Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Locke, Russell, Whitehead, Dewey etc... and never even learned of the major branches of philosophy such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics etc... let alone studied any work, major or minor , in those areas claim to have taken a course in philosophy? Claim to have completed the philosophy requirement? What content should such courses have to minimally satisfy the intention of educators in having philosophy in the liberal arts and science core of any degree program? How can a course dealing with basic skills be considered as a humanities course?

Before going on some disclaimers are in order to avoid any misconceptions? First, I am not opposed to the development of critical thinking and informal logic courses. I believe that they are a valuable addition to the curriculum and would like to see the demonstration of a proficiency in these areas as a requirement for the granting of any undergraduate degree. As to how best to insure the development of these skills,that is another matter. I have argued for the inclusion of critical thinking courses in various curricula. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere, that along with courses in applied ethics, courses in critical thinking are perhaps the most appropriate way to involve students with the philosophic tradition, as these two areas appear, to me at least, to capture more of the Socratic heritage than most other approaches toward teaching philosophy to

undergraduates. I have also played some small role in promoting the development of such courses. Second, I do not argue that such courses should not be considered as philosophy. I do believe that philosophers are very well suited to teach such courses, that informal logic and reasoning are subject matter more appropriate for philosophical inquiry and reflection than for any other method of analysis or study and that, in good measure, philosophers more typically display the characteristics of critical thought in a self- conscious way and in a more thoroughgoing fashion than thinkers in any other field. Third, I most especially do not want to oppose a trend that has been the saving grace for the employment of many philosophers and for the survival of many philosophy programs. Indeed, I am well aware that in some institutions of higher learning courses on critical thinking are fast becoming the basic " bread and butter" courses for the teaching staff. I can easily understand how this is happening. My concern is with what it portends for philosophy instruction if the trend continues unabated, as it is now proceeding,without philosophic reflection upon it as would be characteristic of what philosophers do and what philosophy and humanities requirements are meant to accomplish.

In many institutions the success of the courses in critical thinking in both an academic sense and in a political sense can be attributed to the steady decline in the level of proficiency in the basic communication skills demonstrated by students seeking entry into higher education. In fact the level of achievement in the development of the underlying intellectual skills

prerequisite to and identified with those communication skills is deplorably below what one would expect of such students. The development and remediation of those skills has become an undeniable part of the agenda, overt or covert, of almost every institution of higher learning on the American continents. Courses in critical thinking can and are being made to serve that agenda, in fact, are a reflection of that agenda. In the process,however,have these courses allowed or even encouraged the co-option of philosophy, the subverting of philosophy by academic administrators, who with little or no appreciation for the philosophic tradition, would reduce philosophy instruction to whatever serves the present social agenda of the institution? My suspicion is that they have. In some institutions the development of critical thinking courses is welcomed as a way to satisfy the philosophy requirement while performing more of the remedial function which the college acknowledges that it must serve. If my analysis is correct what is true of philosophy is also true of the humanities as they are being reduced to disciplines that have value only insofar as they contribute to the development of the basic skills of communication and reasoning.

To see what is happening one might look at current textbooks. In reviewing textbooks and course syllabi in the area of critical thinking which have been produced over the last decade one is struck by the almost total absence of any reference to the classical tradition in philosophy. There is almost no mention or use made in most textbooks of passages by well known philosophers either to illustrate points or to serve as exercise material. The

exceptions to this observation principally occur in the latter form. What sort of statement does this make if philosophers are content to see students take such courses as the only course they will ever take in philosophy and have it serve as the one and only introduction to the discipline? In most two-year colleges where philosophy is offered and in many four-year colleges this has become the case;i.e. that students will take but one philosophy course , if they take any, and the most popular courses for them to take are in critical thinking or applied ethics and these are characteristically offered without any prerequisites in philosophy. If philosophers remain content with the enrollment figures, does this mean that they are content as well with the identification being made of philosophy with a set of intellectual skills: an identification made through the textbooks and curricula for such courses.

Is philosophy merely or mainly a methodology? Does it have subject matter that is unique to it as a field of study? What is the nature of philosophy? Who is to answer these questions? The significant point to be made here is that while these questions are by no means new ones, while they have been the subject for philosophic dialogue and reflection for millenia, they have been up to this point questions which philosophers themselves have raised and debated. Now, however, it appears that the forces active within the academic marketplace are playing a role in not only addressing these issues but in answering them as well. Factors other than philosophic consideration and reasoned discourse are operating to

define what philosophy is to be considered as, how it is to be valued and what purposes it is to serve. In very practical terms when non-philosophers determine in what form philosophy is to be offered and that determination is based upon enrollment figures and the need of the institution to remediate academic deficiencies and philosophers accept the role their courses are being made to play, then the conception of what philosophy is all about is being shaped by non-philosophic activities and concerns.

Instructors of the disciplines other than philosophy look to philosophers to improve the basic skills of their students before entering their classes thus better prepared to master their subject matter. They look to philosophers to improve the basic reasoning and critical thought skills of their students. Philosophers at many institutions have been all to happy to oblige. However, what may have been lost in the process of accomodation is that philosophy was probably introduced into the curriculum as a humanity , as a way of transmitting something of the cultural heritage which an educated person ought to have as part of their experience, as part of what they have learned and not simply because it would be nice or valuable for them to have it and not because it gives employment to philosophers but because it is owed to them by the previous generation and that obligation is assumed by the educational institutions. Access to the philosophic heritage is a student's right and it is part of the duty of colleges and universities to see that access realized. It is part of the student's cultural legacy for which higher education provides the means for acquisition.

Unfortunately, a good part of this perspective is often lost as administrators and too many instructors with too much concern for the economic aspects of enrollment patterns attempt to satisfy the immediate needs of the students and pay too little attention to past heritage and to the long-term needs of both the students and their civilization. It isn't only or principally philosophy which has been so influenced by such factors. Far too many colleges courses in English literature have been reduced to little more than composition classes. The development of reading and writing skills is what such courses are seen as serving while the value of the literary heritage is diminished. As the study of English literature is reduced to proficiency in grammar and syntax is the study of philosophy to be reduced to proficiency in the identification of fallacies and the evaluation of arguments? Are we to have an enrollment driven definition of the basic humanities disciplines?

A question posed by such developments is,is critical thinking philosophy? Is philosophy to be equated with critical thinking to the point that a single course in critical thinking could be construed as having properly introduced a student to what philosophy is all about? I would maintain that while courses in critical thinking are to be considered as philosophy they are not to be used as a substitute for an introduction to philosophy course, at least not the courses typically titled as critical thinking courses at this time. Critical thinking courses might be considered as philosophy courses because they introduce students to and hopefully develop in them the intellectual

processes typically characteristic of philosophic discourse and reflection and take as subject matter, if only in passing, questions of an epistemological nature which is well within the province of philosophy. Be that as it may, most critical thinking courses make no effort to introduce students to the scope of the philosophic tradition nor to the various branches or areas of philosophy nor to the most significant traditions within the philosophic heritage and as such ought not be considered as appropriate vehicles for introducing students to philosophy, if that is what one would want to do. Consequently, where there is a requirement in philosophy that was founded upon a desire to have students introduced to the philosophical traditions and heritage, courses in critical thinking ought not be used to satisfy such a requirement or be so modified as to include material which is now foreign to such courses. Not only are the overwhelming majority of such courses devoid of philosophical content but they are characteristically lacking in material that would be traditionally identified with the humanities. There is little attempt made to foster in the student of the critical thinking course an appreciation of the human condition, the strengths and weaknesses of human beings, the historical record of the species' achievements and failures and the potential for the future. How such courses may be thought of as humanities courses must be a puzzlement for anyone who considers the matter seriously.

In a slightly modified form much of what has been said above concerning critical thinking can be applied to various courses in

philosophy which have been developed in order to address specific problems or needs of career oriented curricula, most notably the applied ethics courses. The fundamental concern is that the point is drawing near when the majority of students who graduate from institutions of higher education in the United States will not have taken any philosophy at all and for those who do take some philosophy the majority will have taken some form of an applied ethics course or a critical thinking or informal logic course. If this is the experience almost an entire generation of educated Americans will have of philosophy what conception will they transmit to the next generation of what philosophy is all about and what values philosophy offers to a society? Again what has been said of philosophy might be said of other disciplines in the humanities where courses have been developed and satisfy basic or core requirements and yet have a highly specialized focus which makes it more difficult if not impossible for such courses to achieve the goals of a liberal arts' humanities requirement; courses such as "the history of nursing," the "literature of business," the "art of commerce" and other attempts to relate the humanities to vocational curricula.

In several examinations of the status of higher education and of the humanities which have been published within the last half decade the study of philosophy has been mentioned, where it is cited at all, in the context of developing certain skills or addressing problems. In particular , philosophy is recognized as contributing to the development of critical thinking or reasoning skills and as raising problems which relate to human values.

While philosophy does accomplish or even directs itself toward these two areas they are not the sum of philosophy nor are they of the essence of philosophical inquiry. If philosophy is to be defined through the eyes of educational analysts and administrators who examine it through some form of institutional filter which sees all things in terms of their value in producing some final product, the fear is that much of what has characterized philosophy for over two millenia will be lost. The study of the perrennial issues and traditions within philosophy has great value and has helped to define philosophy for philosophers for centuries. Those outside of philosophy may be blind to this. Theirs may be but a very limited notion of what philosophy is or can do.

There is in these reports the danger that when they are read by academic administrators who are poorly versed in the humanities they may reduce the contribution of the humanities in general to a rather narrow range of human activities and skills related to communications which is turn seen as important only in terms of employment potential for their graduates.

If philosophers are to teach courses in critical thinking and in applied ethics as a service to students with deficienceies in their basic intellectual skills or to students who have a particular career orientation then that is how it should be described. These are "philosophy in the service of" courses and they should not be part of the liberal arts core or general education program but part of the technical or career portion of the curricula requirements. The requirements in philosophy or

the humanities elective within the liberal arts core ought not to be removed or fulfilled by courses in critical thinking or applied ethics. To do so would be to narrow the conception of what philosophy is and can do and would efffectively remove for most students the opportunity they have to gain access to that part of their proper cultural heritage which is the philosophical tradition and the process of philosophical inquiry concerning the most fundamental issues and questions which human beings have ever confronted and with which they still contend. Again, what is true of philosophy would be true of the other humanities disciplines as well. If it is important for nursing students to have command of a foreign language, then so be it. However, the basic course of instruction in a foreign language ought not to be considered on par with a literature course. A course in "Spanish for Hospital Workers," or some such contrivance, ought not to be accepted as a way to fulfill the humanities requirement in the liberal arts core of the curriculum but as a specialized course required in the technical or vocational division of the special curriculum.

So , should there be critical thinking courses? Yes, by all means and for all students, because all educated people, and certainly all those who are awarded degrees in higher education, ought to have such skills. However, such courses ought not be used to satisfy a philosophy or a humanities requirement for that would be to reduce philosophy and the humanities to but a small part of what they have been , are and should continue to be.

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